

Lewis & Clark's America: The Price of Writing Home *by Nancy Clark and Kim Kowalczyk*

Today in the United States we communicate quickly — thanks to overnight Express mail, Priority mail, e-mail and cell phones. Two hundred years ago, when President Jefferson's military expedition set out to explore the unmapped territory west of the Mississippi River,¹ communication was slower. In this pre-stamp period, letters would have been carried by a person traveling on foot, or by horse, wagon, or boat.²

In 1800 the cost for mailing a letter was based on the distance it was sent and the number of sheets of paper used by the writer. To save money, people often wrote on larger sheets of paper than we use now. This way they could write a lot and still qualify for the single-sheet rate. They did not use envelopes, but rather folded the letter with the message on inside. They wrote the address on the outside and then often sealed their folded letter with a blob of melted wax.

The sender could prepay for delivery of a letter, but usually the person receiving the letter paid the postage.^{3, 4}

You can determine cost of sending/receiving letters or newspapers for this period from the following rate chart.

HOW MUCH DOES IT COST? SENDING MAIL IN AMERICA: 1792–1810

Statehood Period

Act of February 20, 1792

Effective June 1, 1792

Zone rates for single letters
Not over 30 miles...6 cents
30 to 60 miles.....8 cents
60 to 100 miles.....10 cents
100 to 150 miles...12½ cents
150 to 200 mile.....15 cents
200 to 250 miles....17 cents
250 to 350 miles.....20 cents
350 to 450 miles.....22 cents
Over 450 mile.....25 cents

- Letters weighing 1 ounce, 4 times single rate; for each additional ounce, add 4 times single rate.
- By U.S. government packet boat, to, from or intra-U.S., 8 cents per sheet.
- By private ship (provided for receipt of such letters only), to or intra-U.S., 4 cents each, when delivered at port of arrival; 4 cents each plus regular postage if further forwarded through the mail.

Newspapers, 1 cent each for 100 miles; 1-1/2 cents each over 100 miles.

(1st Constitutional newspaper act) Future newspaper rates and other rate information can be found in the *United States Domestic Postage Rates, 1789-1956*, POD Publication 15.

Act of May 8, 1794

NEW:

Drop letters.....1 cent

For delivery of Way⁺ letters, 2 cents each plus regular postage.

For local delivery 2 cents each, plus regular postage when from "out of town."

+ *Those who lived outside post office towns could have a post rider carry their letters. The letter was carried to the road (postal route) on the day the post rider traveled it. Picked up along the way, the letters were carried to the nearest post office. There an additional Way Letter fee would be charged for the extra service.*

Act of March 2, 1799

Probably effective same date

Zone rates for single letters
Not over 40 miles...8 cents
40 to 90 miles.....10 cents
90 to 150 miles...12½ cents
150 to 300 miles....17 cents
300 to 500 miles....20 cents
Over 500 miles.....25 cents

"Every letter brought in to the United States or carried from one port to another, in private ship or vessel, 6 cents, if delivered in post office where received; if conveyed by post to any other place, 2 cents added to the ordinary postage."

Act of April 30, 1810

NEW:

Local (drop) letters....1 cent



All information in this chart comes from official U.S. post office records, as compiled in *The American Stampless Cover Catalog* — a resource that includes colonial and territorial periods, U.S. possessions and unorganized territories, from the early 1700s to around 1870. The catalog is available to APS members through the American Philatelic Research Library, www.stamplib.org.

If you'd like to learn more about sending mail in early America, we recommend the books *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse*, by Richard John and *The Posted Letter in Colonial and Revolutionary America*, by Alex Braake — both available in the APRL — and the online postal timelines at the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (www.postalmuseum.si.edu) and the Bath Postal Museum (www.bathpostalmuseum.org)

Note: When Lewis and Clark wrote to President Jefferson, the correspondence was military and therefore subject to private military carriage, where possible. When they or Corps of Discovery members wrote family members, or personal business letters, they would have used the same postal regulations cited in the table. For official presidential correspondence, Lewis would have used a special code, which he and the president devised before the expedition west began.

Once they were past the settlements along the Ohio River and were settled for the winter in 1802-1803 in Illinois Territory on the cusp of the Ohio and Mississippi River, the Corps of Discovery could have written letters and dispatched them back to their east coast homes.

When they wintered at Fort Mandan in 1803-1804, they would have been more isolated. But the following spring, the keelboat was sent down the Missouri to the Mississippi and St. Louis, loaded with messages, observations and specimens for President Jefferson. It would be surprising if some personal mail were not included.

The final opportunity for mail on the journey west would have occurred when the Corps reached the Pacific Ocean, at the mouth of the Columbia River. But they did not see a ship the winter of 1805-1806. If they had seen a ship, they could have sent home their mail and official correspondence via ship, rather than risk carrying it back across the wilderness. But they did not.

Endnotes

1. In 1800, prior to the Louisiana Purchase, the United States territory stretched from the Atlantic to the Mississippi River, and from the northernmost Great Lakes south to the Gulf of Mexico. Great Britain was not



A stampless letter postmarked in Harrisburg, and sent to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, at the 12½ cent rate letter for 90-150 mile delivery.

ready to concede all of the section called the Northwest Territory, which now includes Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Spain claimed much of Florida; France claimed the thriving port of New Orleans and lands northwest of the Mississippi. Spain claimed control of the southwest and much of California and Britain claimed control over the northern areas west to the Rockies. The northwest Oregon Territory remained “unclaimed” although Canadian explorer Mackenzie laid claim to it for Canada. In reality, most of this land was home to numerous Native American tribes, with established trade routes and contacts.

As the Lewis and Clark expedition set out to chart the west in 1803, its only known points of contact to them would have been the frontier town of St. Louis, and ships traveling the Pacific coast, at the mouth of the Columbia River. The latter was visited by fur traders on ships from countries like Russia, Great Britain, and the United States.

2. Mail delivery could be slow, as the few roads that existed outside established routes were in poor condition and unnavigable by coach. Road travel most often was by foot or on horseback, and horses had to pick their way with care or risk a broken leg.

3. The nearest post office outside established cities was located in an inn or general store, where the innkeeper or storekeeper served as postmaster. It was common to have a basket hung on a peg, where letters were kept until the recipients came to town for groceries, a meeting, or a meal. People who expected mail looked through the letters in the basket for theirs. Then they took the cover to the postmaster and paid the postage due. If letters went unclaimed, they were advertised in the local newspaper.

For letters carried by ship before reaching a post office, the ship captain received an extra fee. He was required to put any letters in his charge into the official postal system as soon as he reached the first port.

4. Although the first U.S. stamps were issued in 1847, prepayment of postage on domestic letter mail was not compulsory until January 1, 1856.